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A Lion Book  
an imprint of  
**Lion Hudson plc**  
Wilkinson House, Jordan Hill Road,  
Oxford, OX2 8DR, England  
www.lionhudson.com

ISBN 978 0 7459 5320 5 (UK)

Distributed by:  
UK: Marston Book Services, PO Box 269, Abingdon, Oxon., OX14 4YN

First edition 2009  
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 0

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#### **Acknowledgments**

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This book has been printed on paper and board independently certified as having been produced from sustainable forests.  
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Typeset in 10/13 Palatino  
Printed and bound in x

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# BLACK MUSLIMS IN BRITAIN

Richard Reddie



# Introduction

Although the title of this book is *Black Muslims in Britain*, it is primarily about Black British Muslim converts, rather than all Black British people who are Muslims. Black conversion to Islam has been a growing phenomenon in Britain over the last two decades.

Black Muslims have been living in Britain for centuries; there is evidence of African Muslims in England as long ago as Tudor and Stuart times.<sup>1</sup> There was a significant Somali Muslim presence during the Victorian era, especially in the port cities of Liverpool and Cardiff, and in London.<sup>2</sup> And inward migration from the New Commonwealth of decolonized countries after the Second World War also brought Black Muslims from West Africa to British shores.

But for all this rich history, very little has been written about Britain's Black Muslim presence *per se*. For instance, one cannot compare this history to those of Black Christians and the Black Majority Churches, which have been subject to a number of examinations over the last sixty years.<sup>3</sup> A good example of this disparity can be seen in the authoritative *Oxford Companion to Black British History*, which only carries a two-page entry on Black Muslims,<sup>4</sup> whereas the entry for Black Christian Faith comes in at a weighty six pages. *Black Muslims in Britain* takes a timely look at the growing Black Muslim convert presence, and seeks to inform and educate readers of all faiths, and none, about its increasing influence on British society.

The method deployed here has been to interview a cross-section of Black Muslim converts in as many parts of the country

as possible. The first people interviewed I had met during speaking engagements around the country between 2005 and 2008, both as part of my work to commemorate the bicentenary of the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act in 2007, and in the course of promoting my book *Abolition!* Those I encountered were subsequently interviewed, sometimes on several occasions. A number of these interviewees put me in contact with others who were prepared participate. As a result, I conducted interviews with Black Muslim converts in Leeds, Manchester, Norwich, Birmingham, Walsall, Luton and London. In all these places and on all occasions I was careful to listen to the comments of those who gave opinions and faithful in recording their sentiments.

This book is not a comparative study of Christianity and Islam; rather it looks at the reasons why Muslim converts abandon their Christian backgrounds to embrace Islam. But in order to do this it must examine the role both of the Christian churches and of the Rastafari movement in the UK as well as taking an in-depth look at Islam. The former are important for a number of reasons – most obviously that a great many Muslim converts come from Christian backgrounds. The vast majority attended church during their formative years and have family members who still attend.

The focus on Rastafari is vital because it was the first counter-cultural religious force to capture the affiliations and imaginations of Black youth in Britain. A whole generation of Black youth, including some of my own relatives, became followers of Rastafari<sup>5</sup> in the 1970s and 1980s, having left the Christian church. There are clear resemblances between the subversive approach of the Rasta movement in Britain during its heyday and the current counter-cultural positioning of Islam.

I have also provided an analysis of the history and culture of Black people in Britain, to show the profound effect that this background has had on the religious choices of successive generations of Black Britons. If it is true that ‘we are who we are

because of what we believe’ this makes it all the more important to understand the history surrounding our beliefs. Only when we look critically at the events and decisions of the past do the activities and choices of present make any sense.

The writing of a book on Islam is never an easy undertaking, especially for a Christian. There is little doubt that the fact I am a Christian affected the tenor of the book – not from the standpoint of personal opinion, but from one of access. To write about Black Muslim converts in Britain requires access to such converts, many of whom were reluctant to talk. Whether or not we accept the theory that Islamophobia exists in Britain today, there is little doubt that the events of 9/11 and 7/7 have encouraged the media to peddle negative, pejorative stories about Muslims that link them to terrorism, extremism and hate.<sup>6</sup> And these associations are especially strong in the case of converts, who are portrayed as susceptible to the wiles of persuasive, fanatical preachers of hate. As a result, many were justifiably wary of my motives and took some persuading to participate in this project. I had to gain the trust of interviewees, convincing them of my sincerity and integrity in the way I intended to write about their faith. And in several cases those who agreed to take part subsequently withdrew, often at the last minute.

I took the decision to interview all those who defined or described themselves as ‘Muslims’, which meant including members of the Nation of Islam, an offshoot of the US Black Muslim movement, as well as Sunni or ‘orthodox’ Muslims, who form the majority of Britain’s, and the world’s, Muslim population. The Nation of Islam in the USA was initially established by Wallace D. Fard, also known as W. F. Muhammad and Master Fard Muhammad, and expanded by the ‘Messenger’, the Honourable Elijah Muhammad. Its current leader is the Honourable Louis Farrakhan.<sup>7</sup>

One of the first issues I had to grapple with when writing this book was whether one could even use the term ‘Black’ Muslim.<sup>8</sup>

There is a school of thought which argues that 'Black Muslim' is an oxymoron, and cannot exist within Islam for theological reasons. In theory, at least, Islam does not recognize 'race': consequently, people are simply Muslims or non-Muslims, and many of the 'Black' Muslims, especially those following Sunni Islam, interviewed for this book were keen to explain this. (The same argument can be made for Christianity.) However, if one believes in a God who made human beings in his own image, and created them as ethnically diverse, it can be argued that this diversity is important and needs to be recognized and affirmed. This diversity need not be seen as something that divides people, or grants a particular importance to one group over another. However, for a variety of reasons, we often do apply negative connotations to difference. And to ignore this reality is to ignore the truth that some face discrimination because of that difference.

It is common for most people to use the term 'convert' to describe someone who has either embraced a particular faith or exchanged one belief system for another. Many of the Black Muslims interviewed preferred the term 'revert' or 'reversion' to describe the process of their coming to faith. These terms suggest that they were always Muslims (Islam holds that it is the inherent belief system of human beings), but they had yet to acknowledge this truth. When they did embrace Islam it was regarded as coming back to the truth rather than finding it for the first time. As a result, I use the terms 'revert' and 'reversion' as well as 'convert' and 'conversion' almost interchangeably; in all instances, the sentiment is the same.

Out of deference to Muslims and the respect they have for the Prophet Muhammad – they always use the term 'Peace be upon him', sometimes abbreviated as PBUH – I use an asterisk (\*) whenever the Prophet Muhammad\* is mentioned to convey this respect.

It is my hope that this book will be the catalyst for more

research into a phenomenon that could change the religious and cultural landscape of Britain. Likewise, it should be a stimulus for churches to respond to the challenge presented by the growing Black Muslim presence, and to acknowledge the importance of engaging in dialogue with believers who are reaching out to a similar constituency with a myriad of needs, in a society that still remains unequal and reluctant to affirm difference. *Black Muslims in Britain* shows that Islam is providing a religious alternative for Black Britons seeking spiritual answers to life's eternal questions. This relatively new phenomenon takes its place alongside other aspects of the Black British experience, which continues to grapple with issues of identity and belonging in a society that remains indifferent at best, and hostile at worst. The Black British experience, of education, race-relations, health, community and gender attitudes as well as religion, gives rise to a Black culture which has transformed Britain since the arrival of the SS *Empire Windrush*, with the first substantial group of West Indian migrants to Britain, in 1948.<sup>9</sup> Initially ignored, and then marginalized, Black culture is now embraced and has moved into the mainstream where it has been adapted and refined, but also diluted, to suit particular needs.

Black culture has undoubtedly been an agent of dynamic change, with the power to influence values, ideas and institutions within British society. Cultures and societies are never static, and are always open to new influences. It will be interesting to see how the Black Muslim presence plays its role in shaping both Black culture and the culture of Britain as a whole, and the degree to which it will adapt and change to the conditions surrounding it.

## Chapter 1

# Keeping the Faith: The Beliefs of Black British Muslim Converts

Any study of Black Muslims in Britain must begin with an analysis of their beliefs. Muslims the world over are adherents of Islam, the world's second largest, and arguably fastest growing, religion.<sup>1</sup> The term 'Islam' literally means 'submission to the will of God' – rather than, as is often claimed, 'religion of peace' – and every Muslim must recite the profession, 'There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad\*<sup>2</sup> is the messenger of Allah', which is known as the *shahadah*. As Matthew S. Gordon explains, to 'submit to the divine will is therefore to bring about harmonious order to the universe. In this sense, Islam refers not simply to the act of submission but, more importantly, to its consequence – that is peace (salam).'<sup>3</sup>

## Muhammad and the Origins of Islam

The Prophet Muhammad\*, or Mohammed ibn Abdullah, was born in Mecca around AD 570, and is considered by Muslims as a *rasul*, or messenger, and a prophet of Allah.<sup>4</sup> He is regarded as the 'seal of the prophets', the last and greatest in a line of prophets going back to Adam. As well as possessing these religious attributes, Muhammad\* was also renowned as a philosopher,

reformer, general and diplomat.

Ironically, Mecca, which is now considered Islam's holiest city, home to the *Kaaba* shrine and the Grand Mosque, was a thriving trade centre known for its pagan religious practices at the time of Muhammad's birth. The Prophet was born into the Hashemite clan, who were part of the ruling Quraysh tribe. According to tradition his early life was marked by great sorrow because he was orphaned as a child; he was subsequently raised by his uncle.<sup>5</sup> Muhammad\* became a merchant, initially for his uncle's prosperous caravan business. At the age of twenty-five he married a wealthy, prominent widow, Khadijah, who was fifteen years his senior. Together they had one surviving child, Fatima.<sup>6</sup>

Again, according to tradition, when he was about forty he received his first revelation from God, during the month of Ramadan. Muhammad\* had retreated to a cave at Hira, near Mount Jabal Nur, for reflection and meditation when he received a visitation from the Archangel Gabriel, or Jibril.<sup>7</sup> The Prophet would recite the following revelation:

Read in the name of your Lord Who created.  
He created man from a clot.  
Read and your Lord is most Honorable.  
Who taught (to write) with the pen.  
Taught man what he knew not.  
**Qur'an 96:1–5<sup>8</sup>**

For the remainder of his life he received other revelations, which were subsequently assembled as the Qur'an. According to tradition, a number of these revelations were written down, but the majority were memorized as the Prophet and some of his followers were illiterate.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, one interpretation of the name Qur'an is 'recitation'. The practice of memorizing and reciting the Qur'an has survived until today, with some believers, usually Islamic scholars, being described as *hafiz* (guardian) because they

can to recite the complete Qur'an from memory.

The Qur'an, often transliterated as the Koran or Al-Qur'an, is the sacred book of Islam, which Muslims believe provides heavenly assistance and guidance to human beings. As one commentator explains, 'the Qur'an does not consist of minutely detailed laws and regulations, but outlines the basic framework for each aspect of human activity – social life, commerce and economics, marriage and inheritance, penal laws and international conduct – by appealing to the mind and heart of each individual who reads it.'<sup>10</sup> The Qur'an contains 114 chapters or *surahs*, which are 'unequal in length and ... not arranged in a way that reflects the order of the revelation'.<sup>11</sup> Each *surah* comprises numerous *ayat* or verses.

Islamic tradition also recounts how Muhammad\* experienced an amazing night-time journey alongside the Archangel Gabriel from Mecca to Jerusalem, known as the *isra*, and another to heaven and hell where he spoke with the earlier prophets. In the eyes of his followers, this cemented his status as God's messenger.

On the basis of these revelations, Muhammad\* began to preach monotheism, leading to a wider belief in the unity or *tawhid* of God: 'Allah is greater than anything else, or anything which can be possibly be imagined.'<sup>12</sup> Along with the teaching that everyone should surrender to Allah and that Muhammad\* was his messenger, his initial message either fell on deaf ears or caused offence among the pagan, polytheistic Meccans. Eventually offence won out over apathy and Muhammad\* fled with his followers to Medina on a journey known as the *hijrah*, or withdrawal, in AD 622.

While in Medina, Muhammad\* succeeded in bringing together the warring tribes and consolidating support to such an extent that he could amass a force of 10,000 to march on his native Mecca.<sup>13</sup> During what is known as the 'Conquest of Mecca', Muhammad\*'s Quraysh tribe converted virtually *en masse* while he and his followers set about destroying the numerous idols and effigies within the *Kaaba* shrine as Muhammad\* recited verses.<sup>14</sup>

The *Kaaba* was rededicated for Islamic purposes and is, to this day, the site to which all able Muslims must make a pilgrimage. By the time of his death in AD 632 vast swathes of Arabia had converted to Islam and the faith which, only a few decades previously, had been largely shunned, was prevalent throughout the region.

### Islamic Beliefs

Muslims worship Allah, the supreme and sole God, who they believe created everything and rules over all. In Islam, God or Allah is 'not so much a name as a description of a quality of Being'.<sup>15</sup> Allah is omnipotent (he can do anything that can be done), omniscient (he knows everything that can be known) and eternal (he has always existed and will always exist, beyond time and space) and has neither form nor shape. Allah is not only just and recompenses and reprimands fairly, Allah is also merciful (*rahim*) and is therefore worthy of all worship. The majority of Muslims follow a creed which states six articles of belief that include:

Belief in Allah,

Belief in all the messengers and prophets sent by Allah

Belief in the angels

Belief in the books sent by Allah such as the Qur'an

Belief in the Day of Judgment

Belief in destiny

Muslims believe that Allah revealed the Qur'an to the Prophet

Muhammad\* through the Archangel Gabriel gradually from AD 610 to AD 632, when the Prophet died.<sup>16</sup> Muslims do not consider the Prophet Muhammad\* as the originator of a new faith, but the re-establisher of the faith of Abraham (Ibrahim), Moses (Musa), Jesus (Isa) and other prophets such as David (Dawud), Noah (Nor), Enoch (Idris), Aaron (Haroon) and so on. As one commentator suggests, 'Islamic tradition holds that Jews and Christians distorted the revelations God gave to these prophets by either altering the text, introducing a false interpretation, or both.'<sup>17</sup>

Muslims attach no divine status to the Prophet Muhammad\*, who is regarded as a Messenger, albeit a very important one. Consequently, it is a gross error to use the term 'Muhammadan', like 'Christian', as Muslims are not followers of Muhammad\*, but of Allah. Muslims regard the Qur'an as the literal word of Allah, a sacred manuscript whose recitation, alongside prayer, enables a believer to approach God. Prayer or 'Salat' forms one of the 'Five Pillars of Islam', commitments or obligations that every Muslim must fulfil in order to live a good and conscientious existence. The Five Pillars are:

*Shahadah*: the Muslim declaration of faith which summarizes core Muslim beliefs and must be uttered three times when somebody converts to Islam.

*Salat*: the performance of ritual prayers in the proper way five times each day

*Zakah*: the payment of charity or alms tax to benefit the needy, which is seen as form of worship and personal purification.

*Sawm*: fasting during the month of Ramadan. The festival of *Id al-Fitr* marks the end of Ramadan, during which Muslims thank Allah for the strength to help them practise self-control.

*Hajj*: the pilgrimage to Mecca, which all physically able Muslims must make once in a lifetime.

As one commentator has suggested, Islam is:

A complete way of life governing dress (especially in respect to women), economics, business ethics, rates of taxation, justice and punishment, weights and measures, politics, war and peace, marriage and inheritance, family and domestic life, the care of animals and livestock, sexual relations within marriage, education, diet, cookery, social behaviour, forms of greeting and rules of hospitality. Even the way in which a glass of water is to be drunk is governed by Islamic religious law.<sup>18</sup>

This law, or *fiqh*, is the legal system that seeks to interpret and apply *shariah*. It covers what is forbidden (*haram*), discouraged (*makruh*), neutral (*mubah*), recommended (*mustahabb*), and obligatory (*fard*). For instance, the Qur'an's meticulous dietary laws outlaw the consumption of pig meat, the flesh of carnivores, blood-based products and alcohol. It is only lawful to consume meat if the animal has been ritually slaughtered by a clean knife to the throat. Prior to any meal, Muslims traditionally say the word *Bismillah* ('in the name of God') as a word of thanks for their food.

Even those with only a basic knowledge of Islam are probably familiar with the terms *shariah*, *fatwa* and *jihād* – for a variety of mostly negative reasons. The first two are connected to aspects of Islamic law. In the West, *shariah* has become notorious for its perceived draconianism, when in reality it is simply the law which controls an Islamic way of life, private and public, both for those living under an Islamic legal system and for believers who do not. *Shariah* covers nearly all aspects of everyday life, including family, business, banking, politics and economics.<sup>19</sup> The term *fatwa*, which in fact means a legal or judicial opinion, is familiar from the furore surrounding Salman Rushdie's 1988 novel *The Satanic Verses*, whose contents some Muslims regarded as blasphemous. The *fatwa* pronounced against Rushdie by Ayatollah Khomeini, the

then leader of Iran, called for his death.

The other Islamic term that has crept into common parlance is *jihad*, which, according to tabloid journalists, is a 'holy war' in whose name Muslims carry out extreme acts of violence and terror. Some fervent Muslims do indeed regard *jihad* as a 'sixth pillar of Islam', characterized by 'exerting one's utmost power, efforts, endeavors, or ability in contending with an object of disapprobation'.<sup>20</sup> The literal translation of *jihad* is 'striving' (to serve Allah),<sup>21</sup> which involves defending fellow Muslims when they are attacked for practising their faith.

Alongside the Qur'an, Muslims give special credence to Hadith, collections of oral traditions about the Prophet Muhammad's\* words and deeds.<sup>22</sup> Hadith collections are regarded as important tools for determining the Muslim way of life by all traditional schools of jurisprudence.<sup>23</sup> According to one commentator, 'Pre-Islamic Arabs considered it a virtue to follow the example of one's forefathers. But in the Islamic period one could hardly follow the example of ancestors who were not Muslim, so a new tradition, or "Sunna" had to be found. This was the Sunna of Muhammad\*. After Muhammad\*'s death the learned began systematically to develop the doctrine of duties and beliefs in accordance with the new conditions.'<sup>24</sup>

Like early Christian traditions which avoided all visual representation of Jesus because of his divinity, Islam condemns depictions of Muhammad\* and his family. And, as Nabil I. Matar writes:

It further discouraged the representation of living creatures for such representation would lead to pagan or polytheistic worship. As a result, Muslim artists did not imitate the external world, but conveyed its inherent meaning through the arabesque and geometric patterns. Whenever they chose to draw living creatures, they produced flat, two-dimensional illustrations that were

deliberately unrealistic, with no illusion of depth.<sup>25</sup>

Once an individual embraces Islam he or she becomes part of a family or community of believers known as the *ummah*. Fellow Muslims greet one another with the phrase *al-salaamu alaykumu* or 'peace be unto you', to which the traditional response is *waleykum al-salaam* – 'and upon you be peace'. Islamic greetings are commonplace at a mosque or *masjid*, which serves as a place of worship as well as a location where Muslims can meet and study together. Mosques vary in size, but are invariably full for *salat-al-jumah* or Friday prayer, which is held just after midday and is usually led by an imam, a man who leads the mosque; Friday prayer can also include a sermon.

Like Christianity and Judaism, Islam is a monotheistic faith (it worships one God) that repudiates polytheism and paganism. Such beliefs are considered a form of *shirk* – denying the supremacy of Allah by sharing the true God's glory and power with others – and an unforgivable sin. Those who remain in such a state of 'hiding from God' or *kufr* face eternal damnation.<sup>26</sup> But Muslims see Christians and Jews as 'people of the Book', who recognize the God of Abraham or Ibrahim and share in God's revelation to mankind. In theory, this means they are afforded respect and treated with tolerance as they are considered *dhimmi* or protected persons.<sup>27</sup> History shows that in return for paying the Muslim *jizyah*, or religious tax, these non-Muslims were granted the protection of the state and assured freedom of worship, person and property. Having said that, they were still often regarded as second-class citizens and faced discomforts and inequalities. But in many Middle Eastern countries there were long histories of Jews, Christians and Muslims living side by side in relative peace, and, according to one source, 'Christian and Jewish communities thrived in almost all the Muslim conquests, in stark contrast to the failure of medieval Europe to incorporate permanently its subject communities of Muslims and Jews.'<sup>28</sup>